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ABSTRACT

After discussing the importance of good academic advising, this paper briefly describes the status of advising in 15 community colleges (all but one in New Jersey), highlights especially salient issues, and offers suggestions for the improvement of student advising. Introductory comments point out the benefits of academic advising to the student and the college when it is done well. Next, survey findings are presented regarding academic advising goals, needs, policies, training, personnel, and strengths and weaknesses at the 15 colleges. The paper then compares the local survey findings with the results of a national survey and an analysis of current literature, revealing that the four basic questions in advising were: (1) What are the goals of advising? (2) Who does the advising and what are its rewards? (3) What kind of training needs exist? and (4) How is the program evaluated? After discussing each of these issues, the paper identifies several factors of primary importance in the implementation of a successful advising system (i.e., students and advisors must be aware that a system is in place and must know what the system is designed to accomplish and how it can be accessed; advisors must be available when students need them; and the college must place high value on advising. (LAL)

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ACADEMIC ADVISING IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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The definition of academic advising as set forth by the American College Testing Program's National Center for the Advancement of Educational Practices is as follows:

> "Academic advising is a developmental process which assists students in the clarification of their life/career goals and in the development of educational plans for the realization of these goals. It is a decision-making process by which students realize their maximum educational potential through communication and information exchanges with an advisor; it is ongoing, multifaceted, and the responsibility of both student and advisor. The advisor serves as a facilitator of communication, a coordinator of learning experiences through course and career planning and academic progress review, and an agent of referral to other campus agencies as necessary." (ACT 1984)

This definition is derived from the mission statement in the Standards for Academic Advising published by the National Academic Advising Association. (ACT 1983)

When this comprehensive, idealistic definition of what advising could be is compared with actual situations (a study done at one community college (MCC 1979) revealed that 14% of students surveyed did not know the identity or location of their advisor, 31% had never met with their assigned advisor, and 50% who did know and had met with their advisors did not find it helpful) there appears to be a rather large gap between theory and practice, between the ideal and the real.

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The purpose of this paper is to reiterate the importance of good advising, to describe briefly the situation in fifteen community colleges, to highlight the more salient issues and to suggest some ways to improve the situation.

There seems to be little doubt that when academic advising is done well it benefits both the student and the college. Thomas Grites of Stockton State College has done a great deal of research and writing about advising and he concludes that good advising programs result in better attitudes, enhanced self-concept, and both intellectual and interpersonal development on the part of the student. Increases in academic performance also result. (ACT 1984) The connection of advising with retention efforts has been continually emphasized in the literature and in retention studies done on individual campuses. Teague and Grites (1980) concluded in one study that, "It may be through a more clearly defined and better supported process of academic advising that some institutions are able to minimize severe student deficits in the 1980's". Academic advising is crucial in the student's progress through college; from the first days of course selection and scheduling, through adjustment to the college experience, into career planning and goal setting for the

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future. The relationship between a student and her/his advisor can be the link which makes the college experience meaningful.

Fifteen community colleges (all but one from the state of New Jersey) were surveyed as to their current advising practices. In most cases the questionnaires were completed by a member of the counseling staff. The pertinent results are listed below:

-The goal of advising which was best met was the providing of accurate information about institutional policies and procedures.

-The goal least well met was assisting students in developing decision-making skills.

-There was unanimous agreement that the most important factors in the advising process are that advisors are available to students, that they provide specific and accurate information and that they exhibit a personal and caring attitude toward their advisees.

-The most important needs were seen to be greater administrative recognition of the importance of advising, expanded advisor training and better advisee awareness of the expectations of the advising process.

-Two-thirds of the colleges have a written statement which contains the goals of advising and the responsibilities of advisors.

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-At none of the colleges do students see advisors more than once or twice a term.

-At half of the colleges advisors are responsible for more than 40 students.

-One-third of the colleges have no training for advisors, one-third have some in-service training and the remaining one-third have some sort of orientation.

-Virtually none of the surveyed colleges have evaluation processes.

-At two-thirds of the colleges advising is done by the teaching faculty, at the remaining third it is done by counselors. Where it is done by faculty, counselors usually add some sort of support.

-At four-fifths of the colleges there is no formal reward or recognition for advising.

-At all but four of the colleges, advisors spend less than 10% or no specified time at advising tasks.

The final questions on the survey asked respondents to list the strengths and weaknesses of the advising programs at their colleges. It appeared to be difficult to answer questions about strengths. Several counselors who returned questionnaires and some who added comments were apologetic about the system at their schools. When strengths were listed they usually reflected dedication, experience and caring on the part of those doing the advising. Weaknesses which were mentioned repeatedly were: not enough advisors for too many students, students were not required to meet with

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advisors, inadequate training, the part-time student is neglected and information is not always current.

When the results of this survey were compared with results of a national survey using the same questionnaire, the outcomes were nearly identical for the two-year college sample. The major difference was that in the national survey the ratios of faculty and counselor advising were reversed; nationally, two-thirds of the advising was done by counselors and one-third by faculty. (ACT 1983) This appears to be an expected result; the trend is for advising to be a counselor function in two-year institutions.

Another comparison is also worth noting. In studies of student perceptions of the advising process factors cited as being of primary importance to students are accessibility of advisors, specific and accurate information, advice and counsel and a personal relationship with the advisor. (ACT 1984) These factors are remarkably similar to those voiced by the survey respondents.

From an analysis of the surveys, both local and national, and the current literature, it appears that there are four basic issues in advising:

-What are the goals of advising?

-Who does the advising and what are its rewards ?

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-What kind of training needs exist?

-How is the program evaluated?

The developmental approach to advising which is stressed in the definition we are using is the most recent emphasis for this function. The problem is that those who are responsible for implementing the function still regard it as a primarily informational one. In order for a program to have any coherence at all is is obvious that agreement must exist as to the goals of the program. At colleges where written plans do exist they need to be reviewed by administrators, advisors and students and revised as necessary. Everyone on campus needs to be aware that a plan exists and be familiar with its objectives. Where written plans do not exist, they need to be written and implemented. According to Bostaph and Moore (1980) the most important advising function is providing the opportunity and encouragement for long-range program planning congruent with the students' interests and abilities. Other functions then are the provision of information on courses, policies, and resources and some guidance in the rationale for the requirements and the objectives of education. Students expect more than competent advice; they want to feel that the advisor is concerned about their welfare and progress. To reflect the new thrust in developmental advising then, a college's plan for advising should implement processes to assist students in planning coherent programs and in synthesizing their academic pursuits with their life

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goals and vocational aspirations. (Welsh 1979)

The question of who does the advising appears to be less important that what occurs in the process and the actual delivery model may vary considerably depending on constraints of particular campuses. Proponents of faculty advising argue that faculty have a unique opportunity for personal and instructional contact with students and are therefore more accessible. (Wilder 1981) Astin agrees that student-faculty interaction has a stronger relationship to student satisfaction with the college experience than any other variable and should therefore be the cornerstone for the advising function. (Astin 1977) Williamson, on the other hand, contends that advising should not be done by faculty who may be expert's in their own fields because "some psychological understanding of the complexities of human relations and aspirations is needed, especially because we are now bringing into the colleges many individuals who a few decades ago would not have been enrolled". (ACT 1984) There is no question that the implementation of the developmental advising model involves more skills than a straight informational model. One approach which seems to have promise involves team efforts between faculty and student personnel staffs. Robbins (O'Banion and Thurston 1972) contends that in the strong community college there is a team effort in which teachers and student personnel workers engage in continous dialogue and cooperative activity to plan

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innovative programs including the academic advising program.

Whether advisors are teaching faculty, counselors or both functioning on a team, the program will not be successful unless their efforts are recognized and rewarded. This means that advising must be valued as an activity which is vital to the mission of the college in educating students and may even be crucial to its survival. The rewards for excellence in academic advising can take many forms: financial rewards through bonuses, conference registration, travel allotment or considerations for promotion and tenure; or recognition type rewards such as mention in publications, appreciation dinners, press releases, citations or notices to parents. In order to make the advising function a sought-after assignment in which professionals take pride, it must be valued and rewarded by administrators.

The lack of respect for advising is reflected in its neglect in faculty contracts. Teague and Grites (1980) surveyed faculty contracts at 114 two-year colleges and found that only four gave detailed descriptions of the advising function. Seventy colleges made no mention of advising at all. We know from our own surveys that advising was being done by faculty under contract at some of those colleges, so we must assume that it was not valued enough to rate mention in the contracts.

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The training of advisors is not nearly as controversial an issue but the promotion of such activities to make them seem valued and needed may be problematic. Beginning with an overview of the advising process and its importance in education, training should proceed to help advisors develop the necessary advising skills which are informing, communicating, listening and helping. (ACT 1984) More specifically, according to Wilder (1981), an advisor should be a specialist in the advisee's discipline and be familiar with its requirements and career opportunities, should know the college's regulations, should be familiar with college resources and know when to refer, should have a basic understanding of human behavior and communication processes. Training of advisors can focus on those skills which advisors see as needs. With adequate training interested advisors, faculty or student personnel workers, can become effective in advising.

The final issue in advising is evaluation. Is the system meeting the goals and objectives as stated in the advising plan? The people who are best able to answer the questions are those involved in it. Consequently students should be regularly surveyed as to their perceptions of the advising process. At Penn State, Fayette Campus, (Kapraum and Coldren 1980) sudents are asked to rate advisors on a scale from 0 to 4 in each of the following dimensions:

-Is consistently available, on time, for appointments.

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-Keeps regular office hours.

-Is aware of and has access to information you need.

-Takes time to become acquainted with you personally.

-Discusses your academic goals and progress toward these goals with you.

-Refers you, when necessary, to the proper college representative, administrative staff member, or counselor.

-Is one with whom you have a congenial relationship.

-Has a positive constructive attitude toward advising in general.

-Keeps you up to date on changes in your course of study.

The results of this evaluation are used by advisors for self improvement and by administrators who award points for advising in the general evaluation. The process serves also to reinforce the importance of advising and makes students aware of what should be accomplished in advising.

Advisors and prospective advisors can also evaluate their own attitudes toward advising by asking themselves questions. Walter (1982) has devised such a list of questions among which are:

-Am I willing to take the time to help students discover their interests and explore those interests in terms of their strength and significance?

-Am I creative in putting students in touch with people,

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books, experiences, and resources which will stimulate their curiosity and feed their interests?

-Do I really help students to integrate their learning experiences in such a way so that they emerge from their college careers equipped to function effectively and creatively?

These are not easy questions but just asking them again helps the advisor to focus on the developmental aspects of advising.

From my perspective as a counselor who regularly sees students who are either unaware of the advising system or have ignored it, there are several factors which are of primary importance in the implementation of a successful advising system.

First, both the advisors and the students need to be aware that a system is in place, what the system is designed to accomplish, and how it can be accessed. This means that a written plan, which I think should be devised by students, faculty and student personnel staff, is not only agreed upon but is publicized; to the advisors during their training sessions and to the students during their orientation to the college.

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Ideally, students should have the opportunity to meet with their assigned advisors (who should have expertise in the

student's proposed area of interest) before their first class registration. Since this is not always possible, advisors could at least meet with groups of advisees during orientation or during the first week of classes. Early contact with their advisors gives students a more solid beginning in college.

Secondly, advisors must be available when students need them. On some campuses this may mean that advising centers which are staffed continously and accessible by phone, may be the answer for times of peak need. It is always preferable for students to talk with their own advisors, but answers to specific questions must always be available. Information on non-advisor contacts should be fed to the advisor; a plan for this information flow should be incorporated into the advising system.

Finally, and most important, the college must value the advising process. In order for a workable plan to be devised, the administration must provide for training, time and encouragement for those devoting their energies to the effort. Good advising must have its rewards, whether they are economic or by some form of recognition. And the administration must advertise its committment to the importance of advising in printed materials; the catalogue, viewbooks, recruitment materials and letters to prospective students and their families. The existence of a strong

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advising system is proof that a college cares about its students and the caring attitude is the one which will attract and retain students.

Accurate and current information can be supplied to students through written materials or by computers. As Welsh (1979) puts it, "Advisement must either discover a more significant function for itself or face gradual and eventual phasing out." This significant function would appear to be the developmental one. As colleges evaluate existing advising systems and begin to design new ones they will need to consider the advising needs of the students, the organizational structure of the institution, the desired outcomes, the available resources, faculty contract agreements and advisor load. (ACT 1984) The best system at one college may not work at another. As Crockett (ACT 1984) puts it, "In the final analysis, although the ways institutions choose to deliver advising services to students is important, more important are the institution's commitment to the process and the ability of individual advisors, whoever they may be, to build quality and meaningful relationships with their advisees."

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